Rethinking The Spiritual: A Guide to an Alternative View of Spirituality

by Wendell Krossa

We are living through the greatest transition ever in the history of human thought. The old mythical/religious viewpoint has lost its credibility and millions of people no longer believe that their religion expresses reality as they know it to be. Consequently, many baby boomers left their parents' religion during the Sixties and Seventies, but, later in life, concerned about the spiritual health of their children, they began to return to those churches. Or at least they sent their children packing off to Sunday School.

On abandoning religion as their system of meaning, many people find themselves wandering in a kind of no man’s land. Where do they go? What will take the place of religion? What about the sense that perhaps they have left something good? And what about those threats that to leave Christianity is to go over to the Devil’s side? Hence many people suffer a sense of guilt. How do you disentangle yourself from something that has been viewed as the source of all good, and still function as a full-orbed human being?

Others find some new avenue for expressing their sense of the spiritual, but also find that the new is similar to the old. They may have traded a pastor or priest for a guru, o­nly to find themselves in a situation not unlike the o­ne they left. Others get involved in causes like environmentalism and find the same themes dominate there as in their old religions. The past was always better (original paradise), fallen people have screwed things up (humanity as a cancer o­n the globe), and judgment is coming (Mother Nature will take her revenge with some imminent catastrophe). It’s just more of the same old Fall/apocalyptic mythology that's at the core of many world religions.

Others never found a way to redirect their understanding of the spiritual and continued to hang o­nto the fundamental themes of God above in Heaven, God demanding payback for sin, bloody atonement through a sacrifice, and threats of coming judgment and of hell. Note that 70% of Americans still believe in hell. And how many still believe that payback justice (getting even with the bad guys) is the humane view of justice? I suspect it would be similar. Also many have not been able to find a way around the assumption that the Bible is the word of God and the ultimate authority. They have not yet recognized that the Bible is a very human product containing borrowed mythology intermixed with history.

Still others have not been able to think around the claim that religion is from God and the o­nly alternative is Satan. Truth was presented to them as a simple choice between right and wrong. As Jerry Falwell o­nce asked a man o­n Larry King's show: “Do you believe that salvation is o­nly through Jesus? Yes or no?” Don’t discuss it. Just answer my question, yes or no.

What we need isn't a simple opposing dualism, but a radical rethinking of God, the spiritual, and what it means to be human. And this points to the primacy of love, which levels the playing field to include all humanity. At the heart of this transition is an entirely new story, where we rethink all areas of human understanding based o­n new information about the universe and life.

The ancients believed, for instance, that the gods had created the world out of chaos, they were behind the forces of nature and, as those forces were often destructive, they assumed the gods were angry and punishing people through storms, lightning, floods and disease. Some innovative ancient concluded that the angry gods could be placated with blood sacrifice, so then we have the creation of salvation religions. The ancients also believed that people were created to serve the gods. The shaman and priests then claimed that they alone knew what the gods wanted and would mediate for the rest. They would tell the common people how to serve the gods. And so religion developed as a mediating agency in human society.

Historically, the world religions have all promoted the same basic themes. These include the idea of separation (the spiritual is separate from evil humanity and people are separated from o­ne another in opposing groups), exclusion and opposition (people compete with o­ne another as enemies), domination (the powerful rule the weak), and eventual retaliation and destruction (the bad guys are will be gotten rid of). These foundational themes shaped animal existence and they were later adapted to human existence.

Also central to the old mythical/religious viewpoint was the idea the life was o­nce better (an original paradise), but after people committed the original error or sin, life had regressed to something imperfect and was o­n a descending trajectory heading for eventual catastrophe. But the new view of the universe and life shows the opposite to be true. Life, since the beginning, has been o­n an ascending trajectory of growth, development, progress and advance. Life is fundamentally about hope, not despair.

Unfortunately, in excessive zeal for the new rational approach, an extremist element promoted the dogma of meaninglessness. In doing this, they have denied the most fundamental of all human drives — the drive for meaning. I accept the centrality of this drive but I believe that the scientific approach and the mythical/religious viewpoint have both distorted the impulse for meaning.

Whatever people believe about God, Intelligent Design or meaninglessness, it is evident that life moves along a progressing trajectory. It has moved from chaos to increasing order and more complex organisms and systems. Most impressively, humanity has progressed from the brutality of primitive life to modern societies which recognize basic human freedoms and rights.

We need to take the human impulse for meaning and rethink it in light of our new understanding of the universe and life. And what we are discovering about life will help us find new directions for thinking about spirituality.

We will find, for instance, that God has disappeared. No, not died, as in the theology of Bultman. But, as Thomas Sheehan argues, God has disappeared into humanity. God did not incarnate into just o­ne special person, but rather, incarnated into all of humanity. So we can now forget about focusing o­n God (searching for, serving, being devoted to) and busy ourselves with focusing o­n this life, this world and people around us.

I take the position of the Jesus Seminar ([**http://westarinstitute.org**](http://westarinstitute.org/)), that the historical Jesus is entirely different from the Christian Christ. And, with the Seminar, I believe that it is necessary to remove the distorting layers of religious myth to get at the core teaching of Jesus. That teaching reveals a person who did not promote religion, who did not promote devotion to God, and who did not promote an otherworldly focus. He was very much focused o­n people, this life and this world. As Jacques Ellul has said, Christianity is a contradiction o­n all points to what Jesus intended (The Subversion of Christianity, p.3).

And most important, Jesus never advocated the concept of a separation of sinful humanity from a pure God which is central to the Western religious traditions. This belief led ancient people to create religions to provide salvation. But these salvation religions were established o­n a profound error in ancient thinking, that a separation or rupture had occurred. This simply never happened, and we now have evidence of this. Note, for instance, that separation in Christian theology supposedly led to the introduction of death (the original sin of Adam led God to curse humanity with death, and to abandon the world). But the fossil records show that death has been around since the beginning, long before humans arrived. This means there never was any rupture with God and therefore there is no need to seek something that was not lost.

Now there may be discomfort or even fear over leaving things that are familiar. But the end goal is the full liberation of human consciousness and the human spirit. Ultimately, the transition to a new view of the spiritual is about a fresh vision of hope.